



Château La Nerthe



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSANO

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Rhône Valley Finalé

ON SATURDAY, JUNE 27, 2015, we started our last day in the Rhône with a visit to Domaine du Caillou. It had been over a decade since my last visit in 2002, and I was looking forward to sharing this famous property with the group. In addition to producing some of my favorite wines, I remember how well we had been received by the owner and winemaker, Jean-Denis Vacheron. He gave us an extensive tour of the property which at one time was a hunting lodge used by Georges Clemenceau, the Premier of France during World War I. On the previous visit, we saw the 40-foot roots of a vine which were curled up on a transparent surface of the wine cellar. Talk about old vines—I was impressed!

We had enjoyed our visit immensely, including drinking some of the best wines we had on the trip. Sadly, we found out that soon after our visit that Jean-Denis had died from an auto wreck, leaving the estate to his wife Sylvie and their small

children. Luckily for us, Sylvie hired winemaker Bruno Gaspard who continued the enterprise with outstanding results. When I contacted Sylvie, she graciously agreed to our Saturday visit.

We had a short cellar tour and our guide, Aude, gave an informative talk about the winery and property. We started the tasting with a fabulous white Le Clos du Caillou Blanc Réserve. It is from vineyards just outside the Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation, so cannot be labeled as, but Châteauneuf-du-Pape is one of the best white wines from the Southern Rhône both for aromatics and taste. We followed with our first red, Le Clos du Caillou Quartz Côtes du Rhône. This wine certainly belies its pedigree. It has amazing depth for a Côtes-du-Rhône and with its balance of black fruits and earthy herbaciousness, it is a great match for many foods, both meats and vegetables.

We were very impressed with the 2013 Les Quartz Châteauneuf-du-Pape. This wine is big

and bold, but in an elegant sort of way. It has big fruit and herbs in ample evidence and would be a great match with most red meats and vegetarian dishes. Although approachable now after several hours in a decanter, it will age magnificently and become better over the next two decades.

The final wine is one of my favorites, but is difficult to find. It is the 2012 Clos du Caillou Châteauneuf-du-Pape La Réserve. This wine is sublime and almost always included in the top Châteauneuf-du-Papes of the vintage. It is big and bold, restrained in its youth—full of black fruits



The relaxing view from Château La Nerthe.

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The appetif served before dinner.



Le Homard Bleu—blue lobster in a fish velouté sauce—was accompanied by beet and black truffle gnocchi.



A Mille-feuille Napoleon topped with Crème Baumanière was served for dessert.

and minerality—and built to last for several decades at minimum.

The quality of these wines resulted in most of us buying multiple bottles to send back home. However, these wines are available for purchase in the United States. Because so many wanted to buy wine, three of us took orders and stayed behind to finalize the sale, with the rest taking the bus to our next appointment. After we finished the transaction, Sylvie drove us to Château La Nerthe to join the others.

I have long been a fan of Château La Nerthe's wines, but had never visited the property. My friend, Maria Steckler, is the vice president of National Accounts for Pasternak, the importer of Château La Nerthe. She asked for VIP treatment for our group and we sure got it. Little did we know that Chef Jean-André Charial, owner of the Guide Michelin restaurant Oustau de Baumanière was to be our chef. It was also the first time he had cooked at Château La Nerthe. From the moment we arrived, we were treated like royalty. The

property is so beautiful it is hard to believe it is a functioning winery.

We joined our group just as they were leaving the tour of the grounds to go into the cellar. The tour was quick and efficient almost as if our guide knew something unbelievable was to happen afterwards. We assembled in one of the two beautiful rooms facing the front grounds for appetizers. They were gracefully served on dishes that were almost works of art themselves. The range of appetizers were matched very well by the Rosé Prieuré de Montézargues 2014 which was typically bone dry and refreshing in the heat.

After the appetizers we moved to the other formal room for lunch. The first course was one of the most memorable tastes I've ever experienced. To a person, each of us said it was the best lobster we ever tasted. The blue lobster in a fish velouté sauce was accompanied by beet and black truffle gnocchi. This colorful dish was accompanied by the 2014 Château La Nerthe Châteauneuf-du-Pape blanc. It was full-bodied with good acidity, but also enough richness to compliment the lobster.

The main course was Pigeon des Costières. The pigeon (squab) was roasted, then glazed accompanied by olive-shaped potatoes, sautéed in butter with squab liver pâté mixture spread on top, served with a salmis sauce, a mixture of vegetables browned in butter, chopped game carcasses, white wine, demi-glace sauce and stock, all simmered and skimmed until reduced to a thick sauce. Some gourmands in France believe that this preparation is France's greatest meat and the general consensus is that Jean-André Charial is the best chef for this dish. With this fantastic course we had two wines, the 2004 Château La Nerthe rouge and the

2004 Châteauneuf-du-Pape rouge 2004 La Nerthe Cuvée des Cadettes. Both wines paired exceptionally well with the dish, evidencing spice, earthiness, and minerality along with both red and black fruits. The Cuveé des Cadettes was, as expected, the superior wine and is destined for a longer life.

Our dessert was the traditional Mille-feuille of Baumanière with a light Tahitian vanilla crème sauce, florentine pistache, and caramel ice cream à la fleur del sel. This outstanding dessert was very flavorful and with coffee or tea, brought closure to a great and memorable meal. The after-dinner drink was La Fine du Château La Nerthe 1995, a brandy made by distillation of Châteauneuf-du-Pape wine produced in the châteaux vineyards. We sat at our tables and looked out on the landscape, not wanting this experience to end. After a suitable pause, all but four of our group went by bus to shop in Avignon. My wife elected to go sit outside and take in the splendor of the château and the environs. My friends Milton Johnson, Joe Steakley, and I were invited to take a bottle of La Fine du Château La Nerthe and to relax in another part of the château where we listened to classical music and relaxed and imagined what it was like to live the life of a nobleman. For much of one day we had lived that life including having one of the finest meals imaginable.

Thanks again to Maria Steckler and her team for arranging such an experience. In closing, I should note that she also arranged for our group to buy almost all of the 2010 and 2012 Château La Nerthe Cuvée des Cadettes from the importer in the United States. As a result, we will be able to relive this unforgettable day and keep our memories refreshed for many years. A Votre Santé! 🍷



From left: Milton Johnson, Jim Bryant, and Chef Jean-André Charial.